

ECCLESIASTES 5:13-17

AS WE COME, SO WE LEAVE

“There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand. As he came from his mother’s womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand. This also is a grievous evil: just as he came, so shall he go, and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind? Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger.”¹

The burial of a west Texas rancher caused quite a stir. Wealthy beyond belief, he directed that his wealth was to be displayed in ostentatious fashion during his burial. He was seated in a new Cadillac convertible, the top down to display cowhide seats and steer horns prominently affixed to the hood of the new car. One hand gripped the steering wheel as though he was driving into eternity and the right arm was draped over the back of the seat. Everyone present for the interment would be able to see him thus posed should the unusual sarcophagus ever be exhumed. The man’s instructions were that the car was to be lowered into a grave where the strange mausoleum was to be covered with dirt. As the car was lowered into the earth, one workman was heard to mutter, “Man, that is living!”

Character and the worth is not measured by mausoleums erected in memorial nor even by the houses occupied during the days of our pilgrimage. The number of people who recognise our name is not a realistic indicator of our stature in the light of eternity. The Qohóleth speaks of two men noted for their wealth. In a few short sentences he describes their lives—lives best defined by sorrow.

Keep in mind that Solomon is advocating neither poverty nor wealth—either situation presents its own challenge. You may recall that Solomon wrote elsewhere,

“Two things I ask of you;
deny them not to me before I die:
Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
give me neither poverty nor riches;
feed me with the food that is needful for me,
lest I be full and deny you
and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’
or lest I be poor and steal
and profane the name of my God.”

[PROVERBS 30:7-9]

Certainly, the Qohóleth was cautioning readers against succumbing to the love of money and the attendant delusion that wealth solves all problems. He presents the case of two men—one of whom hoarded riches only to become a miser unable to enjoy what he possessed, and the other of whom invested unwisely only to lose all that he had. Neither individual was able to enjoy what he had. The tragedy was that each of these men failed to enjoy life.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The brief account that Solomon presents reminds me of a parable that Jesus once told. Jesus was teaching and a crowd had gathered around to hear Him. Suddenly, a man who felt his brother had cheated him out of an inheritance pleaded with Jesus to make the brother share the inheritance. Jesus demurred, asking sharply, “Man, who made Me a judge or arbitrator over you?” The Master then appended a cautionary note, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” [LUKE 12:13-15].

Let the words of the Master sink in: “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” The crux of Jesus’ teaching is that one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions! This is a rebuke of all we hold true in this age. Almost unconsciously we assume that wealthy people are somehow superior; unwittingly we give deference to the rich. We don’t stop to think that it is possible that they have cheated and lied to acquire what they have, that they may have twisted the legal system to enrich themselves at the expense of others or that they may have been born into wealth. However one may have acquired wealth, we durst not depend on wealth as security. Neither must we determine our worth by what is held. Solomon warned of wealth,

“Do not toil to acquire wealth;
be discerning enough to desist.
When your eyes light on it, it is gone,
for suddenly it sprouts wings,
flying like an eagle toward heaven.”

[PROVERBS 23:4, 5]

Having heard the plea of the man seeking His intervention so that he could receive his fair share of the inheritance, our Lord related the following parable to the throng pressing about Him. “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” [LUKE 12:16-21].

Wealth is a tool. Riches are not security; rather, wealth is a tool to be employed for God’s glory and for man’s good. You are responsible to use what God has entrusted to your oversight in order to honour Him; you are not at liberty to squander what is in your possession simply because you have the oversight. You have no control over your life, though you have a measure of control over the conduct of your life during the brief days God has allotted. Therefore, whether you have wealth or whether you are restricted by want, act with wisdom so that you glorify God and honour His Name.

ENTERING LIFE — Job uttered a thought-provoking truth responding to his earliest trials, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return” [JOB 1:21a]. Indeed, life begins identically for each of us. This does not mean we are each identical in every capacity; neither does it mean that we have the same advantages as we draw our first breath. It does mean that we receive our lot from God and must answer to Him from our first breath.

The hymn writer has it right when he penned, “From life’s first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny.”² I am arguing that we are equal in vital respects, despite obvious inequalities—accidents of birth, if you will. Clearly, we are born with different genetic loads that make some better adapted to selected pursuits than others. Some have greater innate strength. Others are born with the ability to co-ordinate the body allowing them to excel at various sporting activities. Yet others are born with superior intellectual capacity—learning for them is relatively easy and they are able to grasp complex concepts easily. Perhaps others are born with the capability of withstanding physical hardships. We are not identical; each of us has differing abilities and even different interests.

Nevertheless, we are equals in the sight of the Lord God. One major problem in thinking about equality is that we become so focused on this present existence that we ignore the eternal. When I say that we are equals in the sight of the Lord God, it should be obvious that I am speaking of eternal worth. Christ Jesus, the Son of God, presented His life as a sacrifice offered for all mankind. However, this sacrifice is meaningful only when it is deliberately received. This is the clear meaning of Paul’s statement, “Our hope [is] set on the Living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe” [1 TIMOTHY 4:10]. While salvation is provided for all mankind, so that no one may say they never had opportunity to be redeemed, it benefits only the one who receives what God has provided.

So, let’s begin a brief study of this excellent gift of life that is provided to all who are willing to receive it. A question that is often asked is “What about children that die in infancy?” It is a valid question. Few sorrows are greater than that attending the death of a little child. Unquestionably, the mind turns to the unfulfilled potential, to the fragile nature of life itself; a piece of each of us dies whenever a child dies.

Performing the funeral for a child that died shortly after birth, I find my eyes filling with tears, feeling the deep grief of the mother and the father. Their helplessness in the face of the last enemy can destroy the soul. What can the pastor say that will comfort at such a time? What hope can the man of God offer to that grieving couple? I know of no lasting comfort other than that given by God Himself.

In the Word of God is found the account of David when he committed not multiple grave, awful sins. Sin is like that! We don’t sin and quit. One sin leads to another until we are confronted in our sinfulness, confessing our guilt and receiving forgiveness from the Lord God. Thus it was that David, when confronted by Nathan, confessed his sin and was forgiven by the Living God.

However, there is another dark truth concerning sin that is often overlooked in this day. There are consequences to sin, even when we have sought forgiveness from the Lord. Thus, even though David had confessed, “I have sinned against the LORD,” and although Nathan declared, “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die,” consequences still remained [see 2 SAMUEL 12:13]. God, through His servant Nathan, rendered the dark judgement for David, “‘The sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.’ Thus says the LORD, ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun’” [2 SAMUEL 12:10-12]. The consequences of his sin would continue for many years.

² Keith Getty and Stuart Townsend, “In Christ Alone,” 2001

The first consequence of David's sin was more immediate, however. Before he left the king's presence, Nathan appended this one dark sentence, "Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child who is born to you shall die" [2 SAMUEL 12:14]. Follow the account as provided in the Word of God. "The LORD afflicted the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and he became sick. David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground. And the elders of his house stood beside him, to raise him from the ground, but he would not, nor did he eat food with them. On the seventh day the child died. And the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they said, 'Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spoke to him, and he did not listen to us. How then can we say to him the child is dead? He may do himself some harm.' But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, David understood that the child was dead. And David said to his servants, 'Is the child dead?' They said, 'He is dead.' Then David arose from the earth and washed and anointed himself and changed his clothes. And he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. He then went to his own house. And when he asked, they set food before him, and he ate."

His actions left the servants mystified, and so, gathering their courage, they asked him, "What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while he was alive; but when the child died, you arose and ate food." Take special note of David answer; it is instructive for us when we must comfort the parents of little ones taken before life even begins. David testified concerning the child, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me" [2 SAMUEL 12:15-23].

This is not a statement of resignation on David's behalf; rather, it is an affirmation of confidence. David cannot bring the child back, but he is confident that he shall go to him. Perhaps this was once confusing to those reading the Word. However, the Apostle to the Gentiles clarifies what is in view when he writes, "As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" [1 CORINTHIANS 15:22]. In mercy, God has made provision for those who cannot believe. Infants, those incapable of recognising good from evil, are kept safe in Christ. In His death, Jesus made provision for those who cannot believe.

All are born under sin and thus subject to the wages of sin—that is, death. However, eternal death is not accounted to those who have not sinned after the transgression of Adam. Adam chose to rebel against the LORD God; his was a deliberate exaltation of his own will against the will of God, thus plunging the entire race into death. Thus, even infants and those whose minds have been injured from birth so that they cannot recognise good and evil, are subject to the penalty of sin—that is, death; however, they are not separated from the love of God; rather, they are kept safe in Christ the Lord.

What of those who have never heard these precious truths? Can they be saved? Paul addresses this troubling issue after exposing the ubiquitous sinful condition that characterises mankind in the first chapter of Romans. He affirms that God "will render to each one according to his works," reminding us that "God shows no partiality" [ROMANS 2:6, 11]. He writes, "All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts" [ROMANS 2:12-15a].

Expanding on this matter, the Apostle writes, “Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law” [ROMANS 2:25-27].

Imagine a woman living in a society that has never heard of God’s love and never known that God has provided a Saviour. Now, imagine that woman knowing in her heart that there is a God because she witnesses His eternal power and divine nature through observing His creation [see ROMANS 1:18-20]. Unlike the darkened society in which she lives, she cries out to God in her longing to know Him, asking that He will show her mercy and grace through providing a means by which she may be accepted and thus delivered from judgement. The precepts of God are written on her heart, just as they are written on the heart of all mankind, and she endeavours to honour God, all the while calling out to Him for mercy.

How are we saved? Is it not that we look to Christ the Saviour, believing that He has provided the sacrifice of His own life? You hear me recite these words week-by-week, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Master,’ believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. It is with the heart that one believes and is made right with the Father and with the mouth that one agrees with God and is saved” [see ROMANS 10:9, 10]. The difference between that woman living in a pagan society and us is that we know the Name of God’s perfect sacrifice and she does not know His Name. Both alike look to God for mercy and grace; and God, who is just, receives each alike through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus.

I’ve used these examples to demonstrate that before God we are equal. We are all under sentence of death—it is not a question of if we shall die—we were born in sin and soon estranged from God through our own wilful choice. However, the Living God accepts all who come to Him in faith, believing that He will receive them. All that cast themselves on God’s mercy, seeking forgiveness and accepting the sacrifice that He alone can provide are delivered from condemnation, receiving the gift of life. Iniquities abound in the realm of the temporal, but God has ensured that all alike have opportunity to receive eternal life.

Permit me to say a further word concerning this eternal life. The life we are offered in Christ our Lord is a new quality of life that begins now and continues throughout eternity. Though we cannot claim equality in every physical parameter identified with this present age, we shall be perfected in the life to come. In fact, we who are redeemed now stand perfect in Christ. Before God, Christians are now declared righteous as the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us. The Word declares, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” [EPHESIANS 1:3-10].

Thus, we are confident that we yet shall be perfected—each one—at the return of Christ our Saviour. John’s first missive states, “Little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure [1 JOHN 2:28-3:3].”

EXITING LIFE — A friend of mine was advised by his physician that he needed to lose weight. When my friend resisted going onto a restrictive diet, the doctor insisted that if he didn’t lose weight he was going to die. Let me state for the record, whether someone loses weight or not, they are going to die. My friend’s response to the doctor was definitely humorous, if somewhat off base. He rejected the physician’s advice, saying, “I came into this world naked and hungry; I’m not leaving the same way.” I like my friend a lot, and his protestations are good for a chuckle. However, despite his suppositions, we must indeed leave the way in which we came.

Perhaps we will draw our last breath while fully clothed or perhaps we will wear only a hospital gown, nevertheless, we will carry nothing into the life to come. I’ve cited Paul’s admonition to Timothy on multiple occasions during the past months, and it is fitting that we hear the servant of the Lord once more. Under the guidance of God’s Spirit, the Apostle wrote, “Godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world” [1 TIMOTHY 6:6, 7].

The Apostle has also reminded believers, “We must all appear before the Judgement Seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:10]. Our stature in the estimate of the world has no bearing upon our standing before God. Our holdings in this dying world are meaningless before God. Each Christian must appear before Christ the Righteous Judge so that His perfecting work may be displayed to the praise of His glory. Thus, believers carry nothing into His presence, revealing only the work He has performed in us. The lost must stand exposed as dead and thus excluded forever from the glorious kingdom.

We can take nothing into the life to come, but we can send something ahead. On one occasion Jesus delivered a sermon while seated on a mountainside. As He spoke that day, Jesus issued a warning coupled with an invitation to any who are willing to receive what He said. Jesus said, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” [MATTHEW 6:19-21].

The impact of the Master’s words for us who believe is intensified by the Apostle’s words in the First Letter to Corinthian believers. There, Paul has written, “If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire” [1 CORINTHIANS 3:12-15].

Not what we accumulate in this life, but what we do with what is gathered, is the issue that should concern each believer. What has been gathered in this life must be left when we are called to quit this mortal existence. Therefore, wisdom dictates that we must endeavour to be wise administrators of all that God entrusts to our oversight. We will want to leave a legacy to our children; but more essential in light of eternity is what that legacy might be.

I've appealed to the Apostle's words on numerous occasions as I addressed the saints. His words provide great encouragement as we think on our appearance before the Bema, the Judgement Seat of Christ. We Christians know that each of us shall give an account of our life and service on earth. The Apostle Paul clarified this issue in his Second Letter to the Corinthians. Paul wrote, "We are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" [2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-10].

It seems that many of God's choice saints see our appearance before the Bema somewhat like being called to the principal's office when we were in secondary school. It was never a good thing to hear your name announced over the intercom demanding that you appear in the principal's office—such "invitations" always meant trouble, and we dreaded them!

However, note what Paul said in the First Corinthian Letter. There is no judgement for those who sought to build on a foundation other than Christ Jesus. Therefore, the judgement is restricted to the redeemed; unbelievers are not going to give an account of their ministry since they have no service to be reviewed! However, we who believe will have our service reviewed. The purpose of the review is perhaps poorly understood. Paul mentions various materials with which a believer may be building on the foundation of Christ the Lord—gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay and straw.

Workmanship is not tested in this judgement; rather, the work itself will be tested and proven by fire. Those structures constructed of indestructible materials will survive the examination; those structures built of inferior materials will be destroyed. Gold—those actions and testimonies that exalt God, silver—the deeds and statements that pointed to the redemption provided in Christ Jesus and precious stones—the lives of those redeemed through our prayers and through our witness will survive and continue throughout eternity to the praise of Christ Jesus the Lord. However, those acts and statements that glorified ourselves, wood—the times we exalted ourselves, our denomination or our church, hay—those excuses offered pointing people to our religion without giving glory to Christ and straw—those converts to ourselves will be burned up. All that will remain on the One Foundation will those permanent materials that enhance the foundation—gold, silver and precious stones.

This is the essential take-home lesson for each child of God—the purpose of this divine examination is to glorify Christ the Lord. God has no desire to expose our inability or to demonstrate our flaws—our foibles and follies and failings are painfully obvious to each of us, even if others graciously refuse to mention them. However, in removing that which exalts our own lives, our Saviour exhibits the perfection of His eternal work performed in each life. He receives the glory and we are invited to share in that glory. Thus, the divine examination is designed for something far different from inflicting shame or punishment. I recognise that John speaks of the possibility of shame at His coming; but such shame is transient and not permanent.

This becomes evident in something the Apostle wrote, almost in passing, in one of the earliest letters to have been included in the canon of Scripture. Writing the Thessalonian Christians, Paul stated, "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore, we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

“This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ” [2 THESSALONIANS 1:3-12].

Focus on the **TENTH VERSE** that speaks of “when He comes on that day to be glorified in His saints and to be marvelled at among all who have believed.” Christ is coming to be glorified *in His saints*—He is not coming to shame His people for their failures. Christ Jesus is coming to be marvelled at *among all who have believed*—our Master is not coming to ridicule His holy people because they were weak and ineffective.

Let me expand on this by referring you to Jesus’ High Priestly prayer recorded in John’s Gospel. As He prayed, Jesus prayed for His own, asking the Father, “I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them” [JOHN 17:9, 10]. Did you catch what Jesus prayed? “I am glorified in [those You have given Me]!” The words echo those spoken by the LORD God through Isaiah.

“He said to me, ‘You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified.’”

[ISAIAH 49:3]

We who have believed in the Son of God are identified as “the Israel of God.”³ Thus, the words of the Living God that were recorded by Isaiah apply to us who are followers of the Christ.

I’ve focused on what follows this life in order to say that the deeds we have performed and the manner in which we administered what God entrusted to our oversight will be remembered before the Lord. As those who have believed, we are responsible to use wisdom in administering all that God has entrusted to us. Now, how shall we respond? Knowing of God’s mercies and grace, I can either take the view that it doesn’t matter what I do since I am saved in any case, or I can receive His grace with deep humility and seek to honour Him.

Perhaps some professing saints focus on their own desire, ignoring the responsibilities entrusted to them. Such an attitude benefits no one and dishonours the Master who gave His life for them. Though they may be saved, such attitudes reveal a disturbing immaturity at best. At worst, I suppose it is possible that such professing Christians have deceived themselves. Perhaps they are unsaved, having trusted in a prayer they once recited, or trusting in a rite in which they once participated or even trusting that they agree with some doctrinal code. The Apostle to the Gentiles would challenge such casual believers, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realise this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test” [2 CORINTHIANS 13:5]!

³ GALATIANS 6:16; cf. GALATIANS 3:7, 7, 29; ROMANS 2:29; 4:12; 9:6-8; PHILIPPIANS 3:3

I note that most believers, especially as they mature in Christ, seek to honour Him. Realising His love and experiencing His grace, they look forward to eternity and long to glorify His Name on that day when He returns. So, they live in such a way that they will not be ashamed at His coming, yearning for His return. The message thus far has begged the question, “What of the employment of our goods?”

YOU CAN’T TAKE IT WITH YOU — The essential message for each of us to grasp is that our lives are limited. Your life will be defined by a hyphen; and what lies behind that hyphen defines life and all that lies beyond. One day, if Christ delays His return, each of us will be buried and a tombstone will be erected over our grave or a plaque placed on the vault in which our mortal remains are placed. Engraved on that memorial marker will be a date when we were born and a date on which we died. Between those two dates will be a hyphen.

The summation of your life will be defined by a hyphen. Too often, this hyphen is hides a “grievous evil.” When Qohóleth speaks of “grievous evil,” he is not describing something that is immoral, rather he speaks of something that is painful or distressing. We would not be out of line by speaking of his observation as a calamity, as something beyond our ability to explain.⁴ His observation is offered as a means of instructing readers. Qohóleth implies that what he observed made him sick, and it should sicken us if we will see from God’s perspective.

The wise man speaks of two men—we are not informed if they were worshippers of the Living God or even whether they were good men in the eyes of the LORD, only that they lived and that their goods benefitted no one. They are presented as negative examples of the vicissitudes of life for those who have received wealth by God’s mercies. We know nothing of the work ethic of these two men, nor even whether they inherited what they possess. We only know the effect of what they held on the course of their lives.

The first man accumulated riches. Perhaps he witnessed his riches as they grew, or perhaps he hid them so that they would be secure and available whenever he wanted them. What is important to note is Solomon’s observation that for this man “riches were kept by their owner to his hurt.” Two possible understandings are possible from the Hebrew. The owner may have made himself sick through worry about what would happen to his wealth. However, the more likely understanding is that the owner’s character was increasingly warped as he permitted the wealth he accumulated to assume an ever greater position in his life. Like the rich man in Jesus’ account of Lazarus, the goods acquired kept the man from focusing on eternity. In the account Jesus related, his failure to see eternity resulted in damnation. Solomon doesn’t go that far, but he does tell us that the goods accumulated resulted in warpage of the man’s character.

The second man invested, no doubt in hopes of increasing his holdings. The implication from the verse is that he sought to leave a good inheritance to his son. Alas, tragedy struck—whether through some physical calamity or through a fiscal reversal is immaterial—and all that the man had sought to gain was lost. Consequently, his child received no financial inheritance. He would depart insolvent and his son would receive nothing from the estate.

Several lessons arise from the brief account. If we are wise, we will accept the wisdom Solomon has presented. First, ***Recognise the impermanence of wealth***. If we look to what we possess for our security, we will be gravely disappointed. Riches can never replace health, diligence, intelligent oversight or especially, wisdom. These are far more essential to security than is wealth.

⁴ Graham S. Ogden and Lynell Zogbo, **A Handbook on Ecclesiastes, UBS Handbook Series** (United Bible Societies, New York, NY 1998) 76, 175

A second lesson is revealed in the verses that follow the text. Listen to the words Solomon wrote. “Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart” [ECCLESIASTES 5:18-20]. The nineteenth verse is key to understanding the point Qohóleth makes: “Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God.”

Thus, the teaching of the Word is *Enjoy what God has given*—enjoy both the material possessions and the position He has granted you. Don’t view your wealth as yours to be squandered solely on fulfilling your desires—there will never be enough to fulfil all your desires. Administer your goods wisely so as to honour God, and that will include providing a measure of comfort for loved ones and friends.

I do no harm to the text when I make the observation that the churches of our day have created idols of gold. We tend to worship wealth; thus, as followers of the Lord of Glory, we must *Guard against worshipping wealth*. Throughout history, God’s people have shown a propensity to idolatry, whether in constructing idols [e.g. EXODUS 32:1-6] or in attempting to return to Egypt [e.g. EXODUS 14:10-14; 16:1-3]. The danger is sufficiently great that warnings are interspersed throughout the New Testament. Paul warns the Corinthian Christians (and thus, us) not to imitate our spiritual forebears [see 1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-14]; and John draws his first letter to a close by admonishing those who read, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” [1 JOHN 5:21].

Difficult thought it may be, let’s admit that we are susceptible to erecting idols today. Ostentatious displays of wealth, massive gaudy and ornate church properties assure us of God’s blessing. Great choral presentations and exciting worship teams speak to us of effective ministries. I fear that modern Christendom has sometimes forgotten that God works in quietness to display his strength.

In my devotional reading this week, I’ve read again of Elijah, the mighty prophet of God who single-handedly defeated all the prophets of Baal. After this, when threatened by Jezebel, he fled into the wilderness where God met him and encouraged him. Elijah whined and whinged about how difficult it was to serve in times that were increasingly dark. He complained that he alone was left of all who served the True and Living God.

God permitted him to finish his complaint, and then, the LORD God spoke. “Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD.” Then, “the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’” [1 KINGS 19:11-13]?

Elijah’s greatest labours lay before him. He would anoint kings and signal the end of kingdoms before appointing his successor who would wield the prophet’s staff even more powerfully than Elijah had wielded it. Something like that is true for us. We are not alone. Throughout our nation and throughout our world are individuals who have refused to kneel to the powerless gods of this dying age. I am convinced that so long as we focus on the Lord Christ, our greatest works lay before us—the coming days will witness our most productive service.

ECCLESIASTES 5:13-17
AS WE COME, SO WE GO

I've spoken as I have, not because we need more money; we do, however, need people with even greater commitment to the Living Saviour. We live in dark times, and in such times it is often the case the God's people can be seduced to begin to look to their own abilities, their own holdings, their own ingenuity to attempt to do God's work for Him. What is needed is for each of us to permit God to work through us, resting in Him and rejoicing in His grace as He accomplishes great things through us. This is my plea for this day. May Christ Jesus have the glory and the honour of His people. Amen.